

66 *at 75*



By Tom Miller

With devoted fans and its own state park, interest in the Mother Road is at an all-time high.

Route 66 fans dance to oldies at the highway's 75th birthday party.

66 at 75



Because of Route 66, Americans began to re-explore the West in the 20th century. Instead of moving in a wagon train or riding the rails, Americans pursued their personal dreams one vehicle at a time. Whether that pursuit took place through the hard times of the 1930s, the war times of the 1940s or the boom times of the 1950s, people have rediscovered their roots along Route 66.

To this day, Route 66 represents that living link to past travel adventures that consisted of mom-and-pop diners, rattlesnake ranches and bow-tied service-station attendants. It's history sealed in concrete.



*Well if you ever plan to motor west;
Best take my way,
That's the highway that's the best;
Get your kicks on Route 66*

~ Bobby Troup, 1946

Born in Missouri

What is it about Route 66 that still stirs up so much passion and interest? People and associations all over the United States as well as Europe and Asia celebrate the heritage of this highway. The fact that Route 66 isn't even an official U.S. route anymore hasn't dimmed its appeal. If anything, interest in this legendary highway has grown.

John Steinbeck named Route 66 the "Mother Road" while the U.S. 66 Highway Association in 1927 simply called it the "Main Street of America." In its halcyon days, Route 66 stretched over 2,400 miles through eight states.

The route originally was named U.S. 60 in the early 1920s. But the governor of Kentucky applied political pressure to reserve that designation for his own state. After a lengthy battle, Missouri and Oklahoma officials agreed to accept U.S. Route 66 as the

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■ November 11, 1926

Federal Highway officials approve the highway between Chicago and Los Angeles.

1926 – The original route crosses the McKinley Bridge from Venice, Ill., to St. Louis, Mo., follows Salisbury, Grand, Delmar, Sarah, Olive, Boyle, Clayton and McCausland streets, then heads west on Manchester. ■

■ **1929** – The Chain of Rocks Bridge in St. Louis opens (but is not yet part of Route 66).

1931 – The last section of Route 66 is paved near Arlington, Mo. ■

■ **1931** – The first cloverleaf interchange west of the Mississippi River opens on the new Watson Road at Lindbergh Blvd.

1933 – Route 66 travels over Gravois, Chippewa and Watson Road, converging with the old Manchester route at Gray Summit. ■

■ **1936** – The route moves north, over the Chain of Rocks Bridge, travels over what is now Dunn Road to Lindbergh, then to Watson.

1938 – The last section of Route 66 is paved near Adrian, Texas. ■

■ **1941** – The Coral Court Motel opens in St. Louis.

1941 – Ted Drewes Sr. opens his second frozen custard stand in St. Louis. ■

roadway's designation. They telegraphed their acceptance of the deal from a Springfield, Mo., hotel. As a result, Springfield long has been known as "the birthplace of Route 66." The route was officially commissioned in 1926.

However, some 59 years later in 1985, with considerably less ceremony and fanfare, Route 66 was decommissioned. This official act by the federal government could have been the death of the great American Highway. But it wasn't.

People started to rediscover the route just as the feds started to put it to rest. The

interest grew so much that a national movement to preserve the old route began through federal legislation and funding with support from nonprofit organizations. In the early 1990s, MoDOT, in partnership with the Route 66 Association of Missouri, started installing Historic Route 66 signs all along the route. The effort continues to this day.

The Question: Why Care?

But a larger question remains: why do people still care about a noncommissioned, broken-sectioned, two-lane highway that meanders through areas of the Midwest and West? The answers are as varied and unique as the different sections of Route 66 itself.

St. Louisan Jim Powell, a retired vice president of Ralston Purina and the founder of the Route 66 Association of Missouri, has devoted more than 10 years to documenting the history, preservation and exploration of Route 66. He's also spent thousands of hours traveling the famed road. He attributes his passion for Route 66 to fond memories of past.

"My brother and I traveled Route 66 as kids. Even back then, there was a mystique where it was promoted and sold like no other highway in history," Powell recalls. "We were also at the right age (teenagers) to identify with the TV show 'Route 66' in the early 1960s."

The late great Coral Court Motel in St. Louis, Mo.; Sterling's Hillbilly Store built in 1943 near Hooker, Mo., grew from a souvenir stand to a major Midwest attraction; Twigg's Conoco in Springfield, Mo., built in 1931, features a gable-style roof commonly found along Route 66.



"Some people are saddened to see relics of crumbling buildings. I see beautifully faded paint, textures and places that harbor ghosts from the past."

Shellee Graham, *Return to Route 66: Tales from the Coral Court: Photos and Stories from a Lost Route 66 Landmark*



Pennant Hotel, Rolla



Later, in the 1980s, upon hearing the route was about to be de-certified, "I said that we better drive it before it's gone ... just like a middle-aged Buzz and Tom (from the TV show)," Powell says. So he and his brother, Don, powered up a restored 1960 Corvette convertible (just like the one in the TV show) and embarked on a trip in the summer of 1989 to follow the entire route. This wasn't an easy endeavor, considering the changes and entire missing sections along the route.

"From this experience, my work on Route 66 has become a labor of love," says Powell.

"Travelling Route 66 is a lot like going back in time, a nostalgic trip to the past. Many people enjoy the slower pace, seeing the ruins of an old motor court, a filling station with old gas pumps, cafes with neon signs."

Shellee Graham, *Return to Route 66: Tales from the Coral Court: Photos and Stories from a Lost Route 66 Landmark*



No doubt where this Chevy owner's heart lies.

Happy 75th, Route 66

Many Missourians as well as Americans from coast to coast can relate to rediscovering the Mother Road. That's why, when Route 66's 75th anniversary rolled around in November 2001, the Route 66 Association of Missouri decided to organize and host a "Diamond Jubilee" party.

As the classic song says, "... it winds from Missouri, down through St. Louie ..." So it was only fitting that St. Louis-area Route 66 devotees celebrate the event near the Gateway City at the new Route 66 State Park, off Interstate 44. The park is located on a stretch of retired Route 66 at the former site of Times Beach – a small community that ceased to exist after its residents moved out due to floods and dioxin contamination in the early 1980s.

Several thousand people came from as far away as California and Canada to celebrate the birthday of the famed highway. Carefully restored vintage cars represented the early years of the route, and music from the 1950s and 60s blared as the faithful swapped souvenirs, photos and stories of the highway. People pulled out snapshots of their very first cars and shared memories of their own Route 66 journeys.

"I didn't know what I missed about the route until it was gone. It's like tearing down a neat old building in town. You don't pay much attention because you are in a hurry in life. Once you figured out what this means to you, it is already gone. That is when you start to work hard at trying to preserve what you have."

Skip Curtis, *The Missouri U.S. 66 Tour Book*

1955 1967 1979 1991 2001

■ **1955** – Route 66 shifts to the Veteran's (now King) Bridge; Gravois to Chippewa to Watson becomes the main route; the Lindbergh route is designated "By-Pass 66."

■ **1960** – The TV series "Route 66" premieres on CBS. ■

■ **1968** – The old Chain of Rocks Bridge closes to traffic.

■ **1977** – Route 66 signs come down in Missouri and Illinois. ■

■ **1984** – The last section of I-40 is finished at Williams, Ariz., completing the by-pass of Route 66 across the country.

■ **1990** – Missouri is the first state to designate Route 66 as a historic highway. ■

■ **1993** – The Coral Court closes and is eventually torn down for a subdivision.

■ **1999** – Gateway Trailnet dedicates the old Chain of Rocks Bridge as the world's longest bicycle/pedestrian bridge. ■

■ **1999** – Route 66 State Park opens on the former site of Times Beach.

■ **2001** – Devotees celebrate the route's 75th anniversary at Route 66 State Park. ■



Ron Jones' legs are a living tribute to the Mother Road.

Ron Jones came from Bartlesville, Okla., to celebrate his obsession. Jones' passion was on display with tattoos up and down both legs representing Route 66 landmarks in every state the route passes through. When asked why he felt so moved by the highway that he would permanently commemorate it on his skin, Jones simply replied, "I grew up in a house that was on Route 66 and I graduated in 1966. I kind of feel close to this old highway."

Association member Joe Sonderman, Hazelwood, Mo., is a traffic reporter and producer for KMOX Radio and Metro Networks, and recently he became operations manager for Gateway Guide, MoDOT's St. Louis intelligent transportation system. Sonderman loves the road and it shows in his work and his pastimes – traveling Route 66 in his baby blue 1957 Chevy and collecting Route 66 memorabilia. The license plate on his latter-day T-Bird reads "KXON66." Where does his passion come from?

"With the building of the interstate, we lost the character of the road. We could no longer drive on a stretch that wound around on a lane covered by trees."

Skip Curtis, *The Missouri U.S. 66 Tour Book*

"66 is for people who believe that the journey is half the fun," Sonderman explains. "An interstate will speed you to your destination, but 66 offers diversions along the way ... Every time I travel the highway, I meet new people and try new things. You can travel across America at 70 miles per hour, but you won't experience America at that speed."

St. Louis Regional Chamber & Growth Association Vice President and retired MoDOT Assistant Chief Engineer Freeman McCullah has been an active participant in the association since its beginning. McCullah grew up near Route 66 in southern Missouri, traveled it in the 1940s to get to college at Rolla and drove it a few times from California back to Missouri with a buddy while on leave from the Air Force.

Back then, McCullah says, you needed to plan ahead by loading up your car with



Fans eagerly bought, sold and traded Route 66 memorabilia at the 75th birthday party.

extra water bags strapped to the front and extra tires strapped on the back. It was a four-day adventure and McCullah looks back even at the rough parts of those trips with fondness.

"I think of Route 66 as a part of my past and one I like to hold on to. We (66 enthusiasts) have a common interest and love of those memories," he says. ■

Tom Miller is a senior public affairs specialist in MoDOT's St. Louis area district.

"Route 66 is a fabulous place to mine for images. It's a never-ending supply of color, humor and American history. There is only one chance to save this one-of-a-kind Mother Road. Once it's gone, it will never be again."

Shellee Graham, *Return to Route 66; Tales from the Coral Court: Photos and Stories from a Lost Route 66 Landmark*